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# Itching and Bloating and Hives, Oh My!

The differences between food allergies, intolerances and sensitivity. Plus, how to identify the problem and what to do about it.

Chad Larson, NMD, DC, CCN, CSCS | August 05, 2016



The food you eat is directly connected to your overall health, but not all food is good for all people. In fact, some

can be downright deadly. Fortunately, these days, entire grocery aisles are devoted to products, such as gluten-free, formulated for specific populations, and labeling has become more sophisticated to warn of potential allergens. However, while the common consciousness has come to accept terms like peanut allergy, gluten sensitivity and lactose intolerance as rote, many people are still not clear on what these terms really mean.

Here's a quick overview of each issue — how to identify it, how to treat it and what to do if you're being affected by it. Knowledge like this could possibly help save your life, or the life of someone else.

## Food Allergy

- Comes on suddenly
- Happens every time you eat the food, even if it's a little bit
- Can be life-threatening

A food allergy results when the immune system mistakenly identifies a harmless food as a threat and attacks it, creating antibodies to fight the perceived allergen. This causes a release of chemicals such as histamines into the body, which results in inflammation and symptoms such as itchiness, rashes, stomach pain, chest pain and respiratory issues. In the most severe cases, these reactions are immediate and can be life-threatening.

**What to do:** If you think you or someone else is experiencing a food allergy and are unsure of its severity, get to a hospital or ER immediately. If you've been diagnosed with an allergy, carry an EpiPen with you at all times, or, if your allergy is less severe, carry antihistamines or bronchodilators to alleviate your symptoms.

## The top 8 allergenic foods

- Cow's milk
- Eggs
- Fish
- Peanuts
- Shellfish
- Soy
- Tree nuts
- Wheat

## Food Intolerance

- Comes on gradually
- May happen when you eat a lot of the food or eat it often
- Is not life-threatening

Food intolerance is characterized by a difficulty in digesting certain foods. Unlike a food allergy, which triggers your immune system, a food intolerance does not elicit a histamine response. An intolerance can be caused by different

factors such as poor nutrition, reactions to food additives, and even a lack of digestive enzymes required to break down particular foods, such as lactose in dairy. Symptoms of food intolerance are varied and include bloating, gas, headache, diarrhea, cough, runny nose, stomachache or hives.

**What to do:** If you suspect you've got a food intolerance, keep a food log and try eliminating the offending item from your diet for several weeks. Note how you feel. Then be a guinea pig for yourself and have a little of the food you believe is causing the issue, and again see how you feel. If you know you've got an intolerance, avoidance of that food is recommended. In addition, look into testing options to evaluate any food sensitivities or reactions you might have. Like allergy tests, these tests are often easy to secure through a health-care professional and can provide significant insight into autoimmune responses (in which your body attacks its own healthy tissues) to certain foods.

**Most common food intolerance:** lactose, which is found in milk and dairy.

## Food Sensitivity

- Comes on gradually
- Symptoms may be delayed several days after ingesting
- Can cause long-term damage

Food sensitivity is perhaps the most complicated issue because it presents with symptoms of both food intolerances and allergies, such as hives, rashes, wheezing and runny nose. But unlike the other two, a sensitivity also can cause things such as mood swings, brain fog, joint pain, bad breath, constipation, depression and fatigue. And though symptoms can be less severe or obvious, the possibility of long-term damage is real. For example, celiac disease: When individuals with celiac disease ingest gluten, their immune system responds by attacking the small intestine, ultimately damaging the intestinal tissue. If left untreated, celiac disease can lead to the development of other autoimmune disorders.

**What to do:** Identify trigger foods that you "can't live without," then try to live without them (or at least cut back on their intake). Why? Continual intake of foods you crave can actually bring on a sensitivity to them. As with an intolerance, log your food intake for a while and note any correlation with feeling unwell. Additionally, try to eliminate foods that are known to be allergenic and cause inflammation.

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